

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 307 791

EC 220 300

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TITLE Intimations Regarding Special Education from Research Regarding Deaf-Blind Students.
PUB DATE Nov 88
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (Louisville, KY, November 8-11, 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Skills; *Deaf Blind; *Multiple Disabilities; National Surveys; Nonverbal Communication; Self Evaluation (Individuals); *Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Certification; Teacher Education; Teaching Experience; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

The paper raises issues identified by a study of the content and context of the education provided 568 deaf-blind children and 1,123 students with other disabilities by 124 teachers across the country. Results of the questionnaire indicated that 75% of teachers were serving students in addition to the deaf-blind; that only 5% of the students were reported to have only one disability; that 56% of teachers had a degree above the baccalaureate; that 12% of teachers were certified in deaf-blind education with 31% certified in general special education or mental retardation. Seventy percent of teachers had less than 10 years of experience with the modal amount of experience as 3 years. Repetition was the preferred teaching approach with approaches stressing language or sensory modes never selected as preferred. Eighty-six percent of teachers termed their communication skills as "adequate" but the primary communication mode reported was gestures with voice alone used by 65% of teachers. Results suggested that deaf-blind students are being subsumed in classrooms for students termed "multihandicapped" with teachers who are relatively young and seeking additional certification. Preferred teaching approaches and methods of communication are at variance with what the literature recommends. (DB)

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Intimations...Deaf-Blind

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Intimations Regarding Special Education From
Research Regarding Deaf-Blind Students

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Intimations Regarding Special Education From
Research Regarding Deaf-Blind Students

Occasionally research is serendipitous: one discovers something that one had not been investigating. We are involved in a comprehensive investigation regarding students who are deaf-blind. Our purpose is to examine the content and context of the education provided these students with the prospect of being able to say something about how they learn, how they are taught, and to make recommendations regarding both. We had not yet arrived at the end of our research when we stumbled across some issues which seem to be relevant to the field of special education at large. Although our study is exploratory in nature, and not designed to speak directly to the issues we raise, we, nonetheless, cannot refrain from the opportunity to present certain intimations from our research in hopes that other researchers might be interested in a more direct investigation.

Method

Subjects and Procedure

The potential participants were 608 teachers from across the country who were indicated as serving deaf-blind children by their regional or state deaf-blind directors. Questionnaires were sent to the teachers who were designated

by name or to the program directors for dissemination. The rate of return was only 20%. We do not know whether the teachers did not fill out and return the questionnaires or whether they were not provided the questionnaires by the program directors. It is possible, too, that program directors were too far removed from the actual teaching assignments to know who might be assigned deaf-blind students.

Instrument

The instrument was a questionnaire which provided the opportunity to check certain categories, assign a Likert-type rating, or to supply short answers. The survey questions addressed (a) teacher certification, (b) years of experience with deaf-blind students, (c) additional certifications, (d) variety and proportions of handicapping conditions among their students, (e) choice of teaching approaches for certain types of tasks, and (f) expressive and receptive communication methods used by teachers.

Data Analysis

The information provided by respondents was categorized in frequency tables and percentages of teachers answering were calculated. The percentages were used to construct charts and graphs to illustrate pertinent points.

Results

Students Served

One hundred twenty four teachers responded to the

survey. All of them have contact with one or more deaf-blind students at least one hour every week. In total, the teachers serve 558 students who are deaf-blind and 1123 students who have other disabilities. Seventy-five per cent of the teachers report serving students in addition to those who are considered deaf-blind. Half of the students served by the teachers in this sample were termed "multihandicapped" by the teachers. Five per cent of the students were said to have only one disability. The remaining 45% had deafness or blindness combined with an additional disability. Twenty-six per cent of the total sample were termed "deaf-blind." Thirty-two per cent of the students in the sample were hearing impaired, with or without additional disabilities.

Teacher Credentials

Fifty six per cent of the teachers have a degree above the baccalaureate. Twelve per cent of the teachers indicated that they were certified in deaf-blind education. Thirteen per cent said their primary certification was in deaf education. Twenty one per cent of the teachers who responded to the survey stated that their primary certification was in education of the visually impaired. Approximately thirty one per cent indicated primary certification in general special education or mental retardation. Twelve per cent specified an initial certification in regular education. The remaining twelve per cent had a variety of other certifications.

Approximately half of the teachers in the sample reported more than one certification. Twenty-four per cent of

the respondents reported two certifications and 22% said they had 3-5 areas of certification. Additional certifications are most common among teachers with less experience as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1

Experience

Seventy per cent of the teachers had less than 10 years of experience. Forty per cent had less than five years of experience. The modal amount of experience was three years.

Teaching approaches and communication methods

When asked what approaches they prefer when teaching a deaf-blind student to remember concrete information, to remember abstract information, to solve a problem, to learn a perceptual task, and to learn a concept, respondents indicated a preference for non-sensory methods of structuring the lesson. Repetition was by far the most preferred teaching approach. Approaches stressing language or sensory modes were never the most preferred approach for any type of learning task.

Eighty-six per cent of the respondents termed their communication skills "adequate." The primary communication mode, sent and received, is that of gestures, as opposed to sign language. Voice alone, without accompanying signs or gestures, is used expressively by 65% of the teachers in this

sample when communicating with students who are deaf-blind.

caveats, Possibilities, and Suggestions for Future Research

This was a small sample of teachers who have contact with deaf-blind students. The return rate was such that the sample could not be said to be representative of that particular group of teachers. However, some of the information revealed by the data suggests some unusual situations which might bear investigation by people who are conducting research in special education teacher training and administration.

For example, deaf-blind students are apparently being subsumed in classrooms for students who are termed "multi-handicapped". The teachers in these classrooms are relatively young and appear to be the same ones who seek additional certifications. Are they seeking additional certifications because their pre-service preparation was not adequate for their workload? If so, was inadequate preparation because of the nature of their preparation or because of administrative practice in grouping students?

Their teaching approach of choice, and their methods of communication, appear to be at variance with what the literature would recommend for students who are deaf-blind. Despite documentation that the single most pervasive problem for deaf-blind persons is communication (Wolf, Delk, & Schein, 1982) and that the most basic consideration in

teaching a deaf-blind person is his/her sensory deficits (Kinney, 1972), teachers do not appear to be using techniques which speak to these issues. Since communication skills would appear to relate to the ability to use approaches stressing language, teachers' assessment of their own skill as adequate may be incorrect. The implications of these data are that teachers are not appropriately skilled in communication and this apparent fact is reflected in lack of emphasis on language as a teaching approach. Is this true and what is the effect on the communication abilities, and subsequent adjustment and independence, of this group of students? Again, is the problem due to inadequate training at the pre-service level or is the problem imposed by the grouping system currently in vogue in special education?

These questions relate to the overall concern in special education regarding the balance of "least restrictive environment" with "free, appropriate public education." Are current grouping systems adequately meeting the needs of students of all disabilities types? Is it possible to meet the learning needs of a variety of students in a "multihandicapped" program? How are special education teachers being prepared to teach such a variety of students? What strategies are they using to manage this task? What is the effect of additional training and certification? Most importantly, what are the results in terms of student outcomes? These appear to be questions which pervade all of special education and are important enough to demand specific

research from within that field.

References

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- Hoff, L., Delk, R., & Schein, J. (1982). Needs assessment of services to deaf-blind individuals, final report. Silver Springs, MD: REDEX, Inc.

Certifications per Person by Years of Experience



Teachers with 3 or more certifications